

Thursday, June 20, 1985

US experts say Tableland coffee a world winner

COFFEE grown on the Atherton Tableland has been described by a group of visiting American experts as among the finest in the world, with a great future ahead of it.

A group of 23 coffee growers, from Kona in Hawaii, yesterday heaped praise upon the quality of the Tableland coffee and the highly advanced techniques of cultivation, harvesting and processing used on the 73 ha Jaques Brothers Coffee Pty Ltd plantation near Mareeba.

The plantation is by far Australia's largest commercial producer of coffee and one of only a handful of coffee plantations in this country, most of which are in Far North Queensland.

A spokesman for the group of American experts, Mr Norm Bezona, of the University of Hawaii's agricultural extension service, said from the plantation yesterday all the group had been visibly impressed by the Jaques operation.

"The coffee's great and the technology used is considerably ahead of Hawaii insofar as harvesting and processing is concerned," Mr Bezona said.

The Jaques plantation has a computerised, drip-feed irrigation and fertilisation system servicing each tree, its own highly advanced processing plant, and was the first coffee plantation in the world to undertake fully mechanised harvesting methods.

A New Zealand berry-picking machine was specially converted and developed by the Jaques brothers, Dick and Nat, into the

world's first successful mechanised coffee harvester.

Mr Bezona said the Jaques techniques, especially of harvesting, were likely to prove highly suitable for parts of Hawaii's coffee growing regions, especially around Kona, which produced a world-renowned, gourmet grade of coffee.

"We're expanding our acreage by 4000 acres (1620 ha) of former, rolling grazing land which should prove very amenable to this type of mechanised production," he said.

"Most of our present production is on rocky, mountainsides."

He said the Jaques mechanised harvesting techniques would save Hawaiian coffee growers money in labor costs, as well as solving the major problems the coffee regions currently were experiencing in getting sufficient labor to harvest the crops.

A couple in Hawaii could operate efficiently a farm of only about 1.5 ha whereas, using the Jaques cultivation and harvesting techniques, a single couple could operate a plantation many times that size, he said.

Mr Bezona said in Hawaii coffee was beginning to look like a good alternative crop for sugar cane growers who were feeling the pinch of the world sugar recession and whose land was suitable for coffee growing, especially in the Kona region.

Coffee from the Kona region was produced entirely for the world gourmet market, rather than the mass, supermarket market, he said.

"In the US, the gourmet market has expanded very rapidly," Mr Bezona said.

"There's a distinct trend turning buyers to gourmet grades rather than standard coffees. In the US there's no end in sight to the expansion possibilities.

"I think it's the same in most affluent countries. From what I've seen, there seems to be tremendous potential here in Australia too."

Even with its expansion plans, the Kona region of Hawaii would not be able to satisfy more than a small proportion of US and world demand for top quality coffees, Mr Bezona said.

He said he believed the Jaques coffee was of sufficient quality also to be aimed at the gourmet market without any difficulty.

Mr Bezona said his group was trying to convince the Jaques brothers to go to Hawaii's Kona coffee festival in October/November this year, to give other Hawaiian growers a chance to question them first hand on their techniques.

Earlier this week, Mr Dick Jaques said his company planned to add another 243 ha of coffee trees to its plantation over the next six years and planned to begin expanding sales overseas and into New South Wales from 1987.

Mr Bezona's group, which has been in the Far North for about two weeks, visiting rare fruit and nut farms as well as the Jaques plantation, leaves Cairns for Brisbane on Friday for the start of a trip to southern Queensland and New South Wales.